

# November More Voices: Traumatized

Category: Traumatized

written by Paul Gross | November 1, 2023

Dear *Pulse* readers,

This month's *More Voices* theme is Traumatized. Today, as I write this, entire populations in Israel and Gaza are experiencing trauma. And friends and relatives of Palestinians and Jews in other parts of the globe are being traumatized from afar, as they hear heartbreaking news of injury and death.

Even those without personal connections to Israel or Gaza may be triggered by stories of families being ravaged by bullets and bombs.

As I thought about writing an introduction to this month's theme, I couldn't help but reflect that I've led a sheltered life. I've never experienced warfare firsthand—as a soldier or civilian. I've never had my life imperiled by a natural disaster. The worst car accident I've been in left me shaken and sore, but without lasting physical harm. I've never been shot at or threatened with a knife.

And when it comes to emotional trauma, I've been lucky there, too. My parents were not abusive. As a child, I was never singled out for relentless bullying. At times in my life when I've been most vulnerable—with feelings of despair, or physical illness—I've gotten humane care.

I can, however, think of a couple of instances where I was the cause of trauma.

As a medical student, I was offered the chance to draw an arterial blood gas on a woman our surgical team had admitted for a recurrence of breast cancer. I'd examined her the day before, and she'd been kind and patient with this nervous male student whose hands were cold.

While most blood tests are drawn from a vein, an arterial blood gas, which reveals how much oxygen the blood is carrying, is drawn from an artery, most commonly one deep in the wrist.

A surgical resident handed me a needle connected to plastic tubing. "Just feel the pulse with two fingers. Then spread your fingers apart and insert the needle in the space between them. Point the needle straight down. When you hit bone just pull the needle back slowly and you should see blood pulsing in the tubing."

I did as I was told, but the pulse, which had previously felt so obvious, now seemed vanishingly faint. Still, I spread the index and middle fingers of my left hand and plunged the needle straight into her wrist.

When I hit bone, the woman gasped. I pulled the needle back slowly, praying for a glimpse of pulsing arterial blood.

The tubing remained empty

“Keep trying,” the resident said.

I change the needle angle a bit and pushed it deep, striking bone once again.

Again, nothing.

I started raising and lowering the needle, shallower and deeper in her wrist. It reminded me of rigs I’d seem pumping oil.

She started weeping. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw tears streaming down her cheeks.

Finally, the resident intervened. “Let me try,” he said.

I withdrew the needle from her wrist. “I’m sorry,” I murmured and backed away, perspiring.

I felt horrible. I felt ashamed. I felt like a monster. Medicine’s key principle is *First, do no harm*. Here, in my very first clinical rotation of medical school, I’d managed to do harm—causing real pain with nothing to show for it.

The memory of a needle repeatedly striking a weeping patient’s wrist bone stayed with me.

As a parent I’ve also inflicted trauma.

One day our younger daughter Aster, age three or four, wandered into the kitchen with a question, seemingly out of nowhere: “Am I going to die?”

*Uh-oh.*

As her words sank in, I tried to think fast. At the same time, I felt as if were on the highest diving board, looking down at a faraway pool. What to do? Jump? Climb back down the ladder? I didn’t like any of my options.

I crouched down to Aster’s level.

“Sweetheart,” I said gently, “*everyone* has to die.”

She shook her head and fixed me with an insistent gaze.

“But am *I* going to die?”

I wanted to wriggle free, but couldn’t, pinned—like a bug to a board.

After a long pause, I spoke. “Yes,” I said softly, “you’re also going to die.”

Aster exploded into tears—with a primitive, heartwrenching wail. It was as if I’d slapped her full force in the face. I held her to me as she sobbed, trying to protect her from the bludgeoning I’d just delivered.

I can't recall for how long she cried or how, exactly, she recovered. I do recall feeling as if I'd utterly failed as a father.

Years after, I wondered more than once how scarring this episode might have been.

Not long ago, while talking with Aster, now a woman of thirty, about being a father, I brought up this incident as an example of a misstep I wished I could have another chance at.

Aster looked puzzled.

"I don't remember that," she said. *A reprieve from the governor.*

I supposed it's possible that I didn't permanently damage her, but instead only managed to traumatize myself.

What about you? What's your experience of being [Traumatized](#), November's *More Voices* theme—as a victim, an onlooker or a perpetrator?

Share your story using this [More Voices Submission Form](#). For more details, visit *More Voices* FAQs. And have a look at last month's theme, [Tough Calls](#).

Remember, your health-related story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you!

With warm regards,

Paul Gross  
Editor